

# **Inequality, Poverty and Unemployment - The Impact on Women**

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As we mark women's month to commemorate the role that women have played in the national democratic revolution, it is time to take stock of the livelihoods of working class women in South Africa. The daily experiences of working class women are a measure of how far a society has gone in achieving a society based on promotion of human rights for all. It is time to ask ourselves what is necessary in society for the emancipation of women to be realised and what conditions are necessary in society for this to be achieved.

We are proud, and rightly so, every August of the anti-sexist, anti-discrimination and pro-equality South African Constitution, the bedrock of our democracy. The significance of this for women, across the classes, should not be under-estimated. The rights protected in the Constitution are rights that all women can claim, but they are not yet rights that all women, particularly working class women, are living. The equality in law and rights does not automatically translate into equality in access to jobs, resources, and protection. As Lenin said:

*"Where there are landlords, capitalists and merchants, there can be no equality between women and men in law. Where there are no landlords, capitalist and merchants, where the government of the toilers is building a new life without these exploiters, there equality between men and women exists in law. But that is not enough. It is a far cry from equality in law to equality in life. We want women workers to achieve equality with men workers not only in law, but in life as well. For this, it is essential that women workers take an ever increasing part in the administration of public enterprises and in the administration of the state."*

Lenin, 1920 *To the Working Women*

When we ask "Can the constitution enable our advance towards women's emancipation?" we should answer that the constitution on its own cannot advance struggle. It is a product of struggle on the terrain of the Constitutional Assembly at a particular point in our history. Unless we combine the protection that the Constitution provides with organisation and struggle around the relevant clauses of the Constitution, it cannot advance our struggle. The interpretation of the Constitution is

not only defined in the Constitutional Court. It is also defined in the course of mass campaigning and organising around the content of the Constitution.

Unemployment, inequality and poverty, issues that affect working class families in urban, peri-urban and rural areas, have a particular impact on the women in these families, more so given the historical legacy of colonialism of a special type on most working class families. Women bear the direct burden of themselves not having jobs or being marginalised in the job market, having low income and facing high prices, of carrying the burden of work in the home, of not having access to land, credit and finance. These working class women also feel the result of their husbands, brothers' and fathers' unemployment, of their husbands', brothers, and fathers' difficulty in putting food on the table, and their frustration at unequal access and resources. Often the burden of unemployment and poverty result in drinking and in aggression, often with women and girl children as the victims. The Minister of Women, Children and People with Disabilities has recently said "A life of abuse, discrimination and violation of human rights remain the harsh reality for the majority of the women in our country" (Women's Month Speech August 2012). Domestic violence is a reality that must be addressed.

Economic thought for a long time identified the central problem of women's oppression as the lack of integration of women into the economy, and particularly into the formal economy. It is neither the lack of integration nor merely the form of integration of women that is the issue. The actual problem is that the terms of economic participation for women and men are different. Principally, the form of men's participation is premised on the relative exclusion of women, and women's location within the domestic sphere. The family unit is an economic premise that provides capital with cheap reproduction of labour. Put simply, capitalist profit depends on hidden domestic labour, performed predominantly by women and girl children. Unpaid work by women both in home and in agricultural work makes enormous contribution to the economy which is seldom recognised. The material base of women's emancipation has to be in the integration of women into the economy without gender discrimination, the equalising of the gender division of labour within the household and addressing social and political gender equity.

For women, much as the family is a place of romance, love, motherhood, and security, the household is also a site of oppression. Women should not be conceptualised as dependent members of a household unit, which is what political economy has assumed to be the basic unit of society. The family, the household, the domestic unit is usually understood as a hierarchy with a man at top, with all resources pooled and common interests of the family expressed by the male household head. The extent of female headed households in South Africa is very marked and has been found across time, and is a phenomenon which is not being reversed in South Africa.

We have correctly identified the community as a site of patriarchy, but we must not lose sight of the fact that patriarchy and unequal gender relations are prevalent in all sites of struggle and must be tackled. Historically for the majority of women, access to housing has been largely through a relationship with a man. While access is a Constitutional right that women can demand, it is certainly not the case that the right to access to resources and services is one that has been realised for the majority of working class women. The dependence of women is not yet challenged.

Unless the liberation movement puts the household and family relations under the microscope, the oppressive implications for women in the workplace and in social life will remain unchanged. Work and activity outside the home is premised on an inequality between men and women defined by their household or domestic responsibilities. Capitalism and patriarchal oppression are premised on the unpaid domestic labour of the women at home and yet our Constitution and our approach to gender empowerment have the expectation that women outside of the home should deliver in the same way as men on uneven terrain. We have said that the struggle for women's emancipation is a struggle within a struggle and one that touches both the personal and the political.

In 1996, we asked the question "What are the prospects for gender transformation in South Africa?" and said the following:

*"South Africa has within it both the seeds of gender transformation and the seeds of entrenched gender oppression. The neo-liberal option or the modernising route of the democratic transition permit a kind of solution to racial and gender oppression. It can make the upper strata of society more representative in terms of race and gender. But along with this goes a widening of the socio-economic gap between women of the middle and bourgeois classes and those of the working class. Ultimately oppressive gender relations remain entrenched.*

*"The challenge of the Party and the left is to ensure that the gains made in the constitutional struggles, and in the structures of government, do not only benefit the elite women, but empower working class and poor women in rural and urban areas. The seeds of transformation can liberate the lives of working class women. Which seeds eventually become rooted and nurtured depends on strategy and struggle based on the correct understanding of the interconnection between oppressive gender social relations and women's oppression. Such strategy and struggle must go along with the appropriate organisational forms to carry out the objectives. Without this, neither the emancipation of women nor the transformation of society to a non-gender-oppressive socialist formation will be realisable. When we ask why some socialist states have failed, we must include the extent to which the lack of gender transformation placed brakes on democratising and socialising society."*

Alexandra Kollontai identified that the social basis of women's oppression lies in class relations and private ownership of the means of production and appropriation. She discussed whether there was a basis for a cross-class women's movement. She argued that working class women will more easily identify in struggle alongside their working class menfolk than to side with bourgeois women against men. This is an important issue for the Party to engage with, particularly in the context of the Progressive Women's Movement. It should be clear that the hegemony of the working class and its organisation in all sites of struggle is weakened if working class women are excluded from that organisation. However it is equally important for working class women to assert working class leadership of the progressive women's forces in society and form allies amongst the multi-class strata in the liberation movement. The experience of relative discrimination by women across classes provides a unique opportunity for women of the middle classes to be mobilised in support of working class women's interests, and thereby become aware of working class issues.

In conclusion, the answer on what is necessary in society for the emancipation of women to be realised and what conditions are necessary in society for this to be achieved is that it is only where the means of production are socialised, where power is in the hands of the working class, with women of this class fully empowered at home, in the community and in the economy, that women can be truly freed. Equally to quote Lenin again:

*"The proletariat cannot achieve complete freedom unless it achieves complete freedom for women."*

Lenin 1920 *To the Working Women*.

**Asikhulume!**

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